

THE SUPREMACY OF THE VICTORIAN MAN OVER WOMAN IN ROBERT BROWNING'S "MY LAST DUCHESS"

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ABSTRACT

This study dive into the Victorian men's supremacy over the Victorian women in Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess" (1842). Robert Browning is one of the major poets of the Victorian Era who attempted to renew the suppress Victorian atmosphere, via the panel of poetry, through which Victorian women lived desolated and unhappily. This study targets at proving that females were passively presented as slaves. In Victorian Age women were known as ignorant beings without any knowledge of the world outsides their homes. Rather they were desired to be innocent and simple. A. Orr remarks, "Intellect in a woman should conduce to her being loved, that it should even be comparatively with it, it must be thus subordinated to her womanhood." Women, if compared with men and at the same time symbolized the colonized nations. This poem as being one of Browning's volume Men and Women (1855), put-on brutality of Victorian men against women via Browning's taste of dramatic monologue that roundabout criticized the treatment of women as puppets and inferior.

KEYWORDS: Browning, Victorian Poetry, Dramatic Monologue, Materialism

Article History

Received: 04 Oct 2021 / Revised: 07 Oct 2021 / Accepted: 09 Oct 2021

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning, a major poet of Victorian Age, was born in a middle-class family. His father was a bank clerk and mother was a kindly, religious woman whom he loved and respected as she imprinted in him the devotion to religion, music, flowers and animal (Kearns, 1984, 420)

Browning escorted a boarding school near Camber well. Then, for a short time he became the student of London University as he preferred to pursuit his education at home, advantaging of his father's six- thousand-book library. He got mastery the classics, painting, music, boxing, foreign languages and horsemanship (Burgess, 1987,180).

Browning wanted to be a dramatist. He wrote plays like stratford (1835) and Colombe's Birthday (1844; acted in 1853). But his this attempt was failure. And yet, Browning's failure in writing drama inspired him, by availing from the poetic dialogues written for characters, to coin a brilliant technique that is the dramatic monologue (Donnell, 1991,904).

Browning secretly married Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 and the couple eloped to Florence, Italy where they passed their life happily till Elizabeth's death in 1861. Browning went back London where he died in 1899.

The Picture of Women In Browning's "My Last Duchess"

Browning's this poem published in 1842, demonstrates Browning's relish of the dramatic monologue that is "A poem in which an imaginative speaker addresses a silent audience, ordinarily takes place at a critical moment in the

speaker's life and offers an indirect and unconscious revelation of his or her temperament and character" (Coyle, 1984, 26). Browning takes on such a form to agitate the women place in the early troublesome Victorian Age (1830-47) which is marked by lack of love, ugly materialism and patriarchal autocracy are to be shed light on.

The duke of Ferrara is the persona of this poem, who shows an envoy whose master's daughter's marriage to duke is to be arranged. The poem starts with the duke's delineation of his dead wife's canvas hanged on the wall of his gallery before the envoy. As though the duke attempts to prove his sympathy towards his dead wife to the listener in having a portrait of her. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall/ Looking as if she were alive" (Browning, 2000, lines 1-2).

Even so, the duke, then, turns to grumble to the proxy about his last wife with whom he was displeased. The duchess was kind-hearted, and favors all people, servants and her husband so wholly that makes the duke annoyed. The husband thinks that she must treat him distinguishing as he is noble and merits her joy only and essentially for him. As Browning says in "My Last Duchess" :

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart-how shall I say?- too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked what'er
 She looked on, and her looks went ever where
 Sir, 't wall all one! My favour at her breast (lines, 20-5)

Furthermore, Browning, in another extract of the poem, shows us that the wife looks not to be noble because she doesn't know the legends of the gallant superbness to which her mister belongs. Her simplicity, atrocity in the duke's perspective, leads to her innocence of the duke's nobility that dates back to hundred of years:

Somehow-I know not how-as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With any body's gift (lines, 32-42)

Consequently, the duchess can't apprehend the selfishness of her husband, instead she continues her innocence and courtesy to the ones surrounding her. And the more kind to others she is, the more furious the husband becomes. Therefore, the duke unconsciously reveals to the agent the former's murderous deed while complaining about the dead wife. He commands to his gallants to kill her, and her death is assured by:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt
 When're I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile?
 This grew; I gave commands
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive (lines, 43-47)

The poem lasts with the duke's insistence on having the agent's master's as the inevitable wife since the envoy's master's munificence, regarding the bride's [his daughter] dowry, is out of question:

Then I repeat

The count your master's known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretense

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed

(lines, 48-51)

However, ugly materialism and lacks of love, as some of the Victorians values, are apparently discussed. Here the word "dowry" indicates materialism, since the former is financial settlement given to the bride by the bride's father as an Italian custom (Kearns,1984,24). The duke properly knows how to seize the opportunity. He accepts to get married to a lady, whom he hasn't been familiar with, only for her riches and nobility. Thus, the duke doesn't pay attention to love; caring for money and rank, as the word "Count" suggests.

REFLECTION OF FEMINISM THEMES IN BROWNING'S "MY LAST DUCHESS"

The Want for Love

The Victorian Age lacks love as it glorifies materialism, assured by the fact that half-a-million Victorian women were unmarried due to the Victorian greed. Matter opposes emotion and love. Thus, you can't find someone who is greedy and lover simultaneously since seeking chance and utility entails making heart out of emotion and senseless as a stone ... As well, the percentage of poor Victorian women exceeds the rich's and so the poor were left without marriage as a result of the absence of love and the pursuit of money and position (Abrams, 2000, 1056). Moreover, the duke's preparation, for a new marriage, denies his love to his passing wife as he doesn't express his sorrow for losing her. On the contrary, he talks about her shortcomings that lead him to kill her, instead of mentioning her pros.

It's obvious, then, that the duke neglects his dead wife's emotions and identity, depicting and criticizing her in accordance with his anti-feminist point of view. This attitude towards women is strongly refuted by the second-wave feminist criticism refutes since women are no longer trapped inside a male truth, but women are able to express themselves better than man do (Selden:1993,121).

Man's Adept and Women's Emancipation

The Victorian Age is known for its patriarchal superiority to women. And the paternal autocracy can be figured out in this poem. "Who'd stoop to blame/ this sort of trifling? And I choose/Never to stoop" (lines, 34-5,42-3). The duke doesn't bother himself to tell his partner that her kindness to the lower-class people, parallel to her courtesy to him, severely irritates him. Thus, the duke prefers not to "stoop", to lower himself to his wife as a result of being not noble or, simply, a woman. The duke, who symbolizes the tyrannical Victorian men, thinks that it humiliates his manliness if he discusses with his wife her mistaken behavior. As a result, he selects the direct cruel punishment, and what can be sought for more cruel punishment than death as if she commits a sin.

The duke also represents the god-like figure while the wife stands for the submission and powerlessness. His injustice, wrought to his wife, is apparent when he gets benefit and utility from his wife even after her death. The husband exhibits his dead wife as a bad model not to be followed by the new wife; otherwise the latter will face her counterpart's similar fatal end (Keach, 1996,624).

The idea of the arranged marriage is another instance of the Victorian paternal oppression the Victorian women undergo as they are imprisoned in the golden, fundamental holy-like family. The Victorian women cannot decide their inevitable decisions (Abrams, 2000, 1057).

The final trait of the Victorian masculine dominion over the Victorian women is the duke's painting of "Netpune". "Notice Neptune/taming a sea-horse" (Lines, 54-5).

Naptime is the Roman god of sea, identified with the Greek 'Poseidon', who is Herculean and responsible for sending storms and earthquakes (Lurker, 1987, 285). Neptune, then, shows us a trait of the Victorian domineering men over women; "sea-horse" is a signifier of the weak Victorian women since "sea-horse" is female and notice that their kinship is like the master-servant affinity. Browning's use of the word "tame" underlines, again, the severe Victorian treatment of women.

The Picture of Women as a Hallmark of Colonization

Browning, as being religious, alludes to his opposition to the Victorian colonization via the dead duchess. The weak dead wife stands for the weak nations whose savagery, innocence and simplicity justify the duke's, as a symbol of the greedy Victorian materialists, punishment or colonization. In addition the duchess is a female who stands for the nations lands, the greedy Victorian males aim to colonize. And this point complies with the "Mother Earth", as a universal archetype, that is a goddess] who is a symbol of motherhood, nature, fertility and creation. (Mother Earth, n.d, retrieved 2015 from <http://Wikipedia>).

This female fertile earth is the goal of the colonizing Victorian materialists.

Termination

In light of the discussion of the Victorian women's humiliation in Browning's "My Last Duchess", wrought by the Victorian men; the study pin-points Browning's indirect criticism of the paternal abuse of the Victorian Women. Browning smartly gets the benefit of using "the dramatic monologue" that depicts the dead duchess, a symbol of the persecuted Victorian women, as the victim of the Dukes's arrogance and egoism. The wife's sole mistake was in giving the duke's dignity and position a blind eye. Thus, the duke mercilessly and brutally killed her.

CONCLUSIONS

Accordingly, Browning can be conceived as a feminist since he is against the paternal dehumanization of the Victorian women as he refuses the embodiment of the Victorian women as an emblem of slavery and colonization. It is worth mentioning that Browning does intentionally set his poem in the Renaissance Italy to approximate the influential picture of the urban boasted Victorian society before the readers. It is known that 'Renaissance' means the flowering of humanism and civilization that began earlier in Italy than in England; yet the early Italian adoption of humanism and civilization does not change the stereo-typical image of women in the sense they do not deserve dignity and respect. Likely, the Victorian women conditions worsened in the early troublesome phase of the Victorian period as they were dehumanized by the machinery upheaval, devoid of dignity and esteem in a society that considered it the most civilized and urban ever. Thus, the modern Victorian Age resembles the Renaissance Italy in terms of depressing and oppressing women.

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